

ISAS Working Paper

No. 164 – 6 February 2013

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President Obama's World in His Second Term

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Abstract

The 2012 US elections showed clearly how rapidly America was changing. There was demographic change and perceptible changes in beliefs and attitudes. Several minorities – the African-Americans, the Latinos, the Asian-Americans – were on the way to collectively becoming a 'majority'. There was increasing willingness to accept such tabooed practices as gay marriages and the legalisation of the use of marijuana. Those who wanted public policy to be cognisant of these developments voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama and gave him another term in office. Those who wished America to stand still opted for Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate. After Obama won the 2008 election with the slogan "yes we can" and presented himself as a candidate of change, there was much that was expected of him. But he ran into a solid wall built by the Republicans. In 2012, Romney campaigned for keeping America where it had been for decades. However, as Philip Stevens of the 'Financial Times' wrote a few days after Obama's triumph, "piling up support of protestant white men in the south does not amount to a winning strategy."² Obama was on the right side of American history.

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² Philip Stevens, "The world crowds in on Obama's second term", Financial Times, 9 November, 2012, p. 11.

The results showed which way the various parts of the American populace was leaning. About 93 per cent of African-Americans, 73 per cent of Asian-Americans and 71 percent of Latinos voted for Obama over Romney. “If minority voters continue to favour the Democratic Party to this extent, then demography will indeed prove to be destiny”, wrote the political commentator Eugene Robinson who is also black. “If they want to attract minority support, Republicans will have to take [into] account what these voters believe in a range of issues, from the proper relationship between government and the individual to the proper role of the United States in a rapidly changing world.”³ This Working Paper explores how some of the Asian and Muslim-majority countries and the West’s fight against Islamic extremism will be affected by the new America envisaged by President Obama.

Introduction

The American electorate seldom factors in foreign policy in its voting behaviour. It was perhaps because of this that when President Barack Obama was asked to list his public policy priorities, foreign policy was not one of them. But given the constrained environment in which he will operate for the making of domestic policies, he is likely to achieve greater success in managing world affairs. That is where he may leave a real legacy – an Obama Doctrine. His challenge will be to accommodate the United States in a fast-changing world without measurably reducing his country’s influence and stature. According to Edward Luce’s article in the Financial Times Special Report on the eve of Obama’s second inauguration, “events will dictate the agenda. Managing the new leadership in China, the continued game of hide-and-seek with Iran and the ‘pivot to Asia’ – to name three – will demand time. They will also offer Mr Obama the chance of leaving an imprint on the world. He may even get to define an ‘Obama doctrine’. The world stage will loom larger as his term progresses.”⁴

The extent of change that is likely to occur in the next decade and a half was indicated by a report on global trends to the year 2030 issued by the National Intelligence Council in November 2012.⁵ This report continued the stance adopted in the one issued on the eve of President Obama’s first election to the presidency.⁶ The Council’s work reflects that of the 16 intelligence agencies operating in the United States. According to the report, by 2030 China will be the world’s largest economy but even then the United States will remain “first among equals...No other power would be likely to achieve the same panoply of power under any possible scenario”. Also, “an economically restored US would be a ‘plus’ in terms of the capability of the international system to deal with major crises during this long period of transition.” Among other conclusions it sees the wave of Islamic terrorism ending by 2030, overcome by the sharp

³ Eugene Robinson, “Missed messages” The Washington Post, 29 January, 2013, p. A 15.

⁴ Edward Luce, “World stage offers hope of compelling performance”, Financial Times Special Report: The US President’s New Challenge, 18 January, 2013, p. 2.

⁵ National Intelligence Council, Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds, Washington DC, November, 2012.

⁶ National Intelligence Council, Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World, Washington DC, November, 2008.

increase in the number of people from the middle classes in the Islamic world. These people were more urbanised, better educated, and more tolerant of different points of view than was the case with those who supported Islamic extremism. The report saw the rise of Islamic extremism as a response to a set of circumstances that may not recur. According to one commentary on the report, “the world envisioned... is one in which Islamist terrorism, following the trajectories of earlier waves of violence from the 19th century anarchists to the New Left in the 1970s will exhaust itself and ebb. But the tactics of terrorism will persist. And new actors, whatever their motivation could shift their focus from mass casualties to massive economic disruptions caused through cyber attacks.”⁷ At the same time America will be less beholden to the Middle East having become self-sufficient in energy, possibly surpassing Saudi Arabia as the world’s largest oil exporter. How should Washington’s policymakers deal with this rapidly changing world?

From a “Team of Rivals” to a Team of the Like-Minded

With the elections over and with Obama winning another term in office, Washington – both the government and the think tank community – turned towards the important task of designing a new approach towards a highly unsettled world. The direction Washington was likely to take in Obama’s second term became clear with the appointment he made to his national security team while preparing for his second inauguration. It was clear that the re-elected president was planning to follow a very different course in international affairs compared to the one he had chosen for his first term. Then he had decided to work with what Doris Kearns Goodwin, the presidential historian, had called a “team of rivals”. Goodwin used the term to label the people President Abraham Lincoln brought with him into office in 1861 at the beginning of his first term. Several of those he chose had been his political opponents before he became president.⁸ Obama quite deliberately followed the Lincoln precedence. Inexperienced in many areas of governance, in particular in international affairs, he wanted his cabinet colleagues to openly debate with him and among themselves before reaching important policy conclusions. They did not disappoint. Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had as candidates vigorously opposed Obama’s candidacy as the president-to-be worked his way towards electoral triumph. Brought into the cabinet they became personally loyal to the president but did not always accept his world view. Moreover, as discussed later, Biden and Clinton took opposite positions on the issue of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

For helping him to manage the world during his second term, President Obama turned to a group of people that shared his world view. Senator John Kerry was appointed to replace Hillary Clinton at the State Department. The senator was highly respected in the chamber in which he

⁷ Peter Finn, “Report foresees big middle class, no Islamist terrorism by 2030”, The Washington Post, 11 December 2012, p. A7.

⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2006.

had served for decades and where he had succeeded Joe Biden as the chairman of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee. He also worked as Obama's trouble-shooter, stepping in whenever the president needed an experienced and steady hand. He had visited Pakistan and Afghanistan when these two countries had difficulties in their relations with the United States. Kerry's appointment was approved by the Senate on 29 January 2013 with a vote of 97 to 3 in his favour. Former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel was chosen to head the US Defence Department that was led most of the time in the president's first term by another Republican, Robert M. Gates. Hagel had to fight harder to get the Senate's approval. Some of his earlier policy statements – especially those relating to Iran (he was in favour of dialogue with the Islamic Republic and not particularly keen to use force to stop that country from developing the capacity to make nuclear bombs), and Israel (he had implied that the Jewish lobby had a strong say in the making of the US policy concerning the Middle East) – were found troubling to the Republican legislators. At his confirmation hearing on 31 January 2013, conducted by the Senate's Armed Services Committee, the nominee was grilled for eight hours. One analysis of the exchange gave a good indication of why several senators were not happy with Obama's choice for the US Department of Defence. "Hegel faced relatively few nuanced questions about the Afghan war or terrorist threats. Afghanistan was mentioned just 27 times, and Al-Qaeda only twice, while Israel got 178 mentions and Iran 169."⁹ It also concerned the scholars with views sympathetic to Israel that Hegel had once presented a biography of President Dwight Eisenhower to Obama.¹⁰ "Today, another revolutionary wave is sweeping the Arab world, driven once again by internal factors", wrote Michael Doran, a scholar at the Brookings Institution's Saban Center. "Meanwhile Hagel remains fixated on US-Arab-Israeli dynamic. This magical triangle has never had the all-pervasive influence ascribed to it. As long as Hagel remains in thrall, Eisenhower's true realism will elude him."¹¹ John O. Brennan was picked to head the CIA replacing the disgraced former director Retired General David Petraeus.

All three picks for the national security team subscribed to the points of view different from those held by the people they were replacing. Both Kerry and Hegel were the veterans of the war in Vietnam. They had seen real war and how it affected those who fought in it and also the countries in which they were fought. Neither favoured the "boots on the ground" strategy for America in a fast-changing world. Brennan, while serving at the White House, was the author of the "light foot-print strategy" of limiting the US intervention, whenever, to the practice of cyber-attacks and the use of Special Operations Forces. He was the most ardent advocate of the use of drones to eliminate a small number of people who provided leadership and ideology to groups such as Al-Qaeda. After transferring the CIA as the agency's director, Petraeus had moved away from the counterinsurgency strategy he had authored and practised in Iraq. At the CIA he favoured an approach that had very little engagement of troops. Instead of "boots on the ground",

⁹ Ernesto Londono, "Hegel sharply attacked at Senate hearing", The Washington Post, 1 February, 2013, p. A3.

¹⁰ The referred book was Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battles to Save the World*, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 2012.

¹¹ Michael Doran, "Hegel, following a flawed map", The Washington Post, 1 February 2013, p. A17.

for him drones became the weapon of choice as well. The appointments made by the president to lead America in the field of international affairs was a clear indication that in the second term Obama wanted a team of the “like-minded” rather than that of ‘rivals’.

Freed from the constraints necessarily imposed by the need to win another election, President Obama opted for a fundamental reordering of America’s foreign priorities and expected to be fully supported by his new and like-minded team of advisors on national security. There are three aspects of the contemplated approach – an Obama Doctrine, as it were – that are worthy of note. The first was the recognition that the United States will be a much weaker economy when compared to some of those that were developing at a considerably higher rate. Among these were the continental powers of China and India. In this changed situation, Washington will not be able to always get its way. As Obama had emphasised during his first presidential visit to Asia, Washington would have to work with Beijing to lead the rest of the world. He gave that message in a well-attended meeting in Tokyo while on his way to China. On to the second approach from the first: a very difficult fiscal situation in the United States convinced President Obama that the country could not afford to continue with the defence policy it had pursued since the end of the Second World War. The size of the standing army will have to be reduced and the types of weapons deployed will need to be changed. The drone and cyber-warfare will be the weapons of choice. The third leg of the new approach was also based on the recognition of one more reality. This related to the relative economic decline of continental Europe. It was highly unlikely that any of the states located in this area will ever go to conventional war to settle their disputes. Even Russia, still an outlier in the European system, will not disturb the peace in the area. It had too many problems of its own to worry about acquiring assets beyond its borders. America did not need to station a large contingent of troops on the European mainland. As discussed later, America’s pullback from Europe was creating some space for relatively large European states such as France to deploy their military muscle to influence developments in the countries and in the areas in which they had strategic interests.

Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” and the China Factor

President Obama’s second term will mean the pursuit of a very different approach towards several Asian countries from the one he adopted during his four years in office. Some of what he is likely to do in his second term was tested in his first visit to Asia as president. That was in November 2009. Then in a major speech in Tokyo the new president recognised that the Chinese economy had grown to the level at which it was necessary for Beijing to play, along with Washington, a major policy role in guiding the world economy. This approach was dubbed as a call for the creation of a G2 arrangement comprising the United States and China. This approach

was roundly criticised in the United States.¹² The American political right was not prepared to dilute the concept of American exceptionalism which meant that of all the countries around the globe it was only the United States that had the right to provide worldwide leadership. Some even suggested that this role was given by God to the nation created by the descendants of the pilgrims who first arrived as settlers. Obama retreated from the position he took in the Tokyo address because of the flak he received from the domestic opposition. But in his second term he could afford to be more assertive. His approach to Asia will show up in the way he deals with two opportunities (China and India) and two continuing problems (Afghanistan and Pakistan). Our focus in the Working Paper will be on the last two countries with a passing reference to China.

The problems posed by Islamic extremism and the way it was manifesting itself in different parts of the world will continue to attract the attention of Washington-based policymakers during the four years of the second Obama term. The president and his team will also have to deal with China – one of the two Asian giants – that is going through its own period of transition. One of the most important unknowns the world – and President Obama – will face is the policy stance China is likely to adopt in world affairs. There is now acceptance all around that China will become the world’s largest economy in the next decade or two. Will the Chinese translate their economic power into military prowess and browbeat their neighbours into submission? The Chinese aggressive approach towards some territorial disputes in East and South China Seas has begun to worry its Asian neighbours. Washington is also concerned. China had also begun the effort to solve the problem of being land-locked on three sides. As David Pilling wrote for the Financial Times, “in May something curious will happen to geography of China. The continental-sized country whose supercharged development has been concentrated in cities on its eastern coast, will gain something it has never had: a western seaboard. An 800-km gas pipeline will connect Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, to the Bay of Bengal, passing through central Myanmar. Next year an oil pipeline [will] open along the same route. Road and rail will follow.”¹³ On 31 January 2013 there was an announcement from Islamabad, Pakistan, that the management of the port of Gwadar was being handed over to a Chinese company, terminating a 40-year contract signed earlier with the Port of Singapore Authority. China Overseas Port Holdings, the chosen company, was expected to invest in the Pakistani port “which has failed to meet the lofty goals set by the military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf on its completion in late 2006 and now lies largely unused.”¹⁴

¹² For a discussion of the first Asian trip by President Obama, see Shahid Javed Burki, “President Obama’s First Asian Visit”, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, Brief No. 138, 9 November 2009.

¹³ David Pilling, “China’s pipeline marks the scramble for Myanmar” Financial Times, 31 January, 2013, p. 9.

¹⁴ Declan Walsh, “Chinese company will run strategic Pakistani port”, The New York Times, 1 February 2013, p. A6.

China's unrelenting economic rise was the product of a style of economic management that was quite different from what is perhaps best described as the Davos consensus which according to an analyst served "the world pretty well in the 30 years running up to financial crisis [of 2007-09]. The spread of capitalism, democracy, trade and investment coincided with a long period of rising prosperity and increasing freedom. Since the financial crisis, however, the ideas promoted at Davos have lost public confidence and support... Despite the often justified cynicism that Davos provokes, the end of an era when the world's most powerful people embraced similar ideas – and co-operated closely – would be a sad and dangerous moment."¹⁵ That era-end could happen if China took the position that it had developed a better way of managing the economic system than was the case with Western capitalism. Notwithstanding China's extraordinary economic rise, it was not certain that the greater economic security it had provided its citizens would guarantee the country social and political stability. Whether the situation in the country will remain calm as it continues to grow and modernise its economy will be an important question, to which no categorical answer could be provided at the beginning of President Obama's second term. The transition that was underway in China to a new generation of leaders following the November 2012 meeting of the Communist Party of China was an exceptional development. No other non-democratic government dominated by one political party had found a way of peacefully and systematically transferring power from one set of leaders to another. In the Soviet Union it was only the death of the paramount leader that brought about change. Vietnam, the other large remaining Communist country, has not developed a system of regime change. With the election of Xi Jinping as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, the Chinese kept the 10-year schedule for changing the leadership. Xi is succeeding Hu Jintao. Hu had followed Jiang Zemin who was the leader in the period following the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis. There was another difference this time around. Both Jiang and Hu were picked by Deng Xiaoping, the supreme leader who followed Mao Zedong. Xi is the choice of a wider community of leaders.

Afghanistan and Pakistan: The AfPak Region

The American approach towards Afghanistan and Pakistan needs to be viewed from the perspective of this fundamental change in America's thinking about foreign affairs. This approach has to serve Washington's long-term strategic interests. A year earlier, the Obama administration had already announced its pivot towards Asia which involved reducing the attention it had given in the past to Europe in favour of greater involvement in Asia. This involvement had both military and economic components. On the military side, it meant reducing the share of Europe in America's troop deployment from 60 to 50 per cent of those stationed outside the United States. This meant positioning more soldiers in Asia. During

¹⁵ Gideon Rachman, "A conspiracy of reasonable people is a force for good", Financial Times, 29 January, 2013, p. 9.

President Obama's November 2011 visit to Asia, the third of the four he made during his first term, he announced the creation of a new base at Darwin, in northern Australia. It was announced that the base, when it became fully operational, will have 2,500 Marines stationed there. What about Central and South Asia?

Should Washington continue to worry about the possibility of some places in this part of the world becoming bases from which the terrorists could yet again launch attacks on America and its assets around the world? The answer to the latter question is obvious. Washington cannot lower guard to a point of another 9/11 becoming possible. While this objective is clear, what is less apparent is the nature of the strategy needed to achieve it. Should the strategy be concerned only with the impact it will have for the security of the West, in particular that of the United States? Or should the US also factor in the conditions that prevail in the areas where Islamic extremism could take root?

Obama's initial policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan – the region that came to be called AfPak – was the consequence of intense internal US debate. That led to a compromise among different well-articulated positions. The hardliners – the “boots on the ground” advocates such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Defence Secretary Robert Gates – supported the position taken by the generals, in particular David Petraeus. The generals wanted the American strategy in Afghanistan to be based on their seeming success in Iraq. In the case of the latter, an American surge in the number of troops, along with the decision to work with the Sunni dissidents who resented the rule by Shias, lowered the incidence of violence in the country. It stabilised Iraq long enough for the United States to completely pull out its troops. In Iraq, Petraeus had “single-handedly elevated counterinsurgency doctrine (known by its military acronym, COIN) into a sort of gospel. For a brief period, COIN held sway in Washington.”¹⁶ But if the strategy seemed to have worked in Iraq, it was not necessarily appropriate for Afghanistan. In his well-researched book, *The Insurgents*, Fred Kaplan blames General Petraeus for showing a great deal of hubris in managing the operation in Afghanistan. As worked out in Iraq, COIN meant mobilising counterinsurgency networks to pursue extremists while, at the same time, spending most of the resources protecting Iraqi civilians from carnage.

Although Obama initially bought this strategy for Afghanistan and put Petraeus in charge for implementing it as the commander of the American forces in that country, the president did so only half-heartedly. Later he came to the conclusion that COIN made no sense for Afghanistan whose people, culture and terrain were so different from those of Iraq. “In part from overconfidence, in part from inertia”, Petraeus began to see his counterinsurgency doctrine “as a set of universal principles” writes Kaplan.¹⁷ Those opposed to basing the Afghan approach on the experience in Iraq correctly argued that the enormous difference between the two countries meant that a very different way had to be adopted for dealing with the situation in the South

¹⁶ Thanassis Cambanis, “How we fight”, *The New York Times Book Review*, 27 January 2013, p 16.

¹⁷ Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, Simon & Schuster, 2013, p. 87.

Asian country. What was needed was a very limited engagement aimed at taking out the insurgents that did the most damage. It would be foolhardy to secure all of Afghanistan and turn it into a country that was governed by democracy and democratic institutions, they argued. Vice President Joe Biden was the most vocal exponent of this approach. However, President Obama opted for something in between the two strategies. He ordered a surge one-half as large as that demanded by the generals while laying a strict timeline for the pullback of these additional troops.

The policy circles in the government as well as in the think-tank community got engaged in two discussions once the elections were over. These involved determining the type of presence in Afghanistan once America's involvement in combat in that country would be over. And second, how should Washington manage the use of drones as the weapon of choice in the continuing war against terrorism. Drones could be deployed in different parts of the world while troops could only be used at best in a couple of places.

Most think-tanks had reached the conclusion that Pakistan and not Afghanistan will be the centre of terrorist activity aimed at the United States. That was before Syria seemed headed towards a collapse. If Pakistan destabilises, many feared that the country could have a strong Al-Qaeda presence. "The principal terrorist concentrations in South Asia are in Pakistan's federally administered tribal areas" wrote Kimberley Kagan and Frederick W Kagan, respectively, of the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise in Institute. They argued for a large presence of American troops after the 2014 withdrawal and the manning of several bases in the provinces of Afghanistan that were close to Pakistan. The fact that the areas in Pakistan with terrorist concentrations were distant from the sea meant that the required anti-terror operations had to be carried out from land bases. "Bases in Afghanistan obviate all these problems", explained Kagan and Kagan in their assessment. "US forces operating from Khost, Jalalabad and Kandahar can strike targets in Afghanistan (or Pakistan) with Predators and special mission units. Such operations have been critical to the success of counterterrorism operations in this region, including the killing of Osama bin Laden (Abbottabad is about 150 miles east of Jalalabad, 750 miles from the Indian Ocean)." They suggested a much larger American presence than the one the White House had in mind. "The United States can stabilise Afghanistan if it maintains around 68,000 US troops in Afghanistan into 2014, dropping to over 30,000 thereafter (about what we have in Korea). The idea that the war is inevitably lost [in Afghanistan] is a convenient mask behind which decision-makers hide to deflect responsibility for pulling out troops who are making a real difference. We have argued that the current defeatism about Afghanistan is overdrawn and unfounded. But it is more important for Americans to internalise a simple fact: We must either stabilise Afghanistan at this minimum level or abandon the fight

against Al-Qaeda and its allies in South Asia. Any alternative ‘light footprint’ strategy is a dangerous mirage.”¹⁸

But these ambitions were not shared by the planners in the White House. They preferred a much smaller presence in Afghanistan, and that, too, was contingent upon Kabul and Washington reaching an agreement about the terms of deployment. The Americans wanted the grant of immunity against prosecution for the American forces operating in Afghanistan. There was a tentative agreement that such immunity could be given to the US forces in the country. During his visit to Washington in January 2013, President Hamid Karzai indicated that he will convene a *loya jirga* (an assembly of elders) to debate – and he hoped to – approve – such an arrangement. Also, the US force, if one were to remain behind, will have an advisory rather than an operational role. Adding to the uncertainty was Afghanistan’s political future about which discussions between the Taliban and Kabul government began in Paris in late December 2012.

The United States’ experience in Mali – a situation discussed below – was not reassuring in terms of placing trust in the forces it had trained to handle extremism in the troubled countries. According to one newspaper account, “to the dismay of the US, junior Malian officers, trained as part of US\$ 620-million pan-Sahelian [anti-]terrorism initiative launched in 2002 to help four semi-desert states counter Islamic militancy, took part in a coup in March 2012. Others among them defected to the Tuareg revolt that saw a coalition of Islamist militias, allied Algerian militants from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, capture northern two-thirds of Mali. Potentially, these US trained officers are using US counterinsurgency knowhow against France’s intervention force.”¹⁹ Could there be a similar outcome with the much larger force that United States was committed to training in Afghanistan? Several incidents of what had come to be known as the “green on blue” attacks – the Afghan soldiers attacking those from the United States – had put into doubt the effectiveness and loyalty of the large Afghan force the Americans were hoping to leave behind after their departure.²⁰ The presence of such a large and probably not a well-disciplined force on its borders also made Pakistanis nervous.

As President Obama headed for his second inauguration in January 2013, the White House seemed inclined to leave, at best, a very small force once the withdrawal was completed by the end of 2014. On the eve of President Hamid Karzai’s visit to Washington when he met with the American president as well Secretaries Leon Panetta and Hillary Clinton at the US Department of Defence and the State Department, the American administration told the press that it was weighing the possibility of leaving no troops behind after 2014. In a conference call with news reporters, Deputy National Security Adviser, Benjamin J Rhodes, said that leaving no troops “would be an option that we would consider” adding that “the president does not view these

¹⁸ Kimberley Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, “What we’ll need in Afghanistan: The realities of fighting terrorism after 2014”, *The Washington Post*, 25 November, 2012, p. A19.

¹⁹ William Wallis, “Mali adds to list of boomerangs from Washington’s war on terror”, *Financial Times*, 19 January 2013, p. 2.

²⁰ See Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, “‘Green on Blue’: Clash of Colours in the Afghan Coalition”, *Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, Insights No. 188*, 25 September 2012.

negotiations [with the visiting Afghan president] as having a goal of keeping US troops in Afghanistan.”²¹

Another development that drew the attention of Washington’s policymakers as Obama began his second term was the realisation that Islamic extremism does not respect international borders. That is the case in particular where the state has a weak presence at its border or, as is the case with Pakistan, at one of its borders. It was the easy movement of militants across ill-defined borders that helped them to remain effective. They took advantage of the sanctuaries that were created in the areas where the writ of the government did not run. First Pakistan on its side of the border and then Afghanistan on its side did not – or, perhaps more accurately, were not able to – prevent extremists from operating on the other side and using sanctuaries for rest as well as training. The Haqqani network that operates out of Pakistan’s North Waziristan tribal agency has been an active operator against both the government in Kabul as well as the NATO forces. It was able also to do great harm as it could not be easily reached by ground forces. The drone was the only weapon that was deployed by the United States. At the same time, Afghanistan was not able to stop Mullah Faizullah from operating in Pakistan’s Swat district. It was from his sanctuary on the other side of the border that he planned and carried out the attack on Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani teenager, who miraculously survived a direct hit on her while on her way to attend her school in Mingora, Swat district’s largest town.

The Mali Factor and the French Connection

In light of some of the developments in North Africa it became clear to the policymakers in Washington as well as in several West European capitals that Al-Qaeda could create bases in countries other than Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. It could operate against western interests from these new bases. What Al-Qaeda was in search of were weak states that were failing to serve their people and thus creating a significant body of people who were drawn towards Islamic groups. The sudden collapse of the government in the Saharan state of Mali in January 2013 was an indication of the peripatetic nature of Islamic extremism. The rapid collapse of state authority meant that such developments could happen in geographic locations other than the AfPak region. Such developments had to be checked and not allowed to germinate as they did in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

What occurred in Mali in several ways replicated what had happened a decade or two earlier in Afghanistan. There, as in Mali, Al-Qaeda was a foreign force drawing its strength from the Arab world. The locals were initially foot soldiers but later created organisations of their own. It was this aspect of Islamic extremism that worried the West, not only the United States, but also such European states as France. The insurgency in Mali was led by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,

²¹ Mark Landler and Michael R. Gordon, “US weighs leaving no troops in Afghanistan after 2014”, The New York Times, 10 January 2013, p. 5.

AQIM. France intervened, fearing that an established Al-Qaeda in North Africa could become a threat for its own security. Many among the millions of migrants who had settled in France traced their origin to the countries in North Africa. They could come under the influence of Islamic dissidents especially if the latter acquired some territory from which they could operate. This happened in Britain where some in the Pakistani community that had been present for several generations in the country came under the influence of Al-Qaeda and the extremist ideology that it espoused. The 7 July 2005 bombings sometime referred to as 7/7 were a series of coordinated attacks carried out by a group of young men of Pakistani origin. This episode was an example of the radicalisation of a Muslim community living in Europe.

According to Sudarsan Raghavan of The Washington Post, “most of the rebels who took over [Diabaly] this central town for five days this month were Malian and spoke the local languages of the north and the south. But their commanders were different...They were foreigners who spoke Arabic.” Will France succeed in Mali when the United States had failed in Afghanistan? To quote Raghavan again: “But it also means that French could face a full-blown guerrilla insurgency punctuated by suicide bombings, homemade suicide bombs and ambushes, tactics used in Afghanistan, Algeria and neighbouring Nigeria. Many of the foreigners are veterans of these and other conflicts.”²² There was some fear that the AQIM may launch another attack following the operation carried out on 16 January 2013 at an oil facility in south Algeria operated in part by British oil giant BP. According to one account, “new intelligence on Al-Qaeda’s affiliate in North Africa indicates that the militant group is seeking to carry out attacks on other Western targets after its deadly attack in Algeria...The push to mount follow-up strikes is seen as evidence that Al-Qaeda has been emboldened by the 16 January attack.”²³

There were other parallels with the situation in AfPak. Initially the fight against the state was led by a local Islamic group called Ansar Dine or “defenders of the faith”. This was also the case with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Malian group turned to AQIM for finance as well as guidance on guerrilla warfare. The foreign group – flush with cash from kidnapping foreigners and experience from other conflicts – was happy to oblige. Compared to the rule by the Taliban in Afghanistan, that by the Islamists in Mali was relatively short. The Taliban were in Kabul for five years; the Islamic groups in the northern parts of Mali held sway for only 10 months. The Islamic radicals occupied the desert towns of Gao and Timbuktu for a brief period but the record of their rule was even more brutal than that of the Taliban. They “summarily executed, stoned, and mutilated people for being non-believers.”²⁴ Another difference was that while the Taliban were almost entirely Pashtuns, the main ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Malian occupation was by Arabs, Mauritians, and Algerians.

²² Sudarsan Raghavan, “Foreigners in a leading role”, The Washington Post, 29 January, 2013, pp. A1 and A7.

²³ Greg Miller, “Al-Qaeda’s N. Africa branch said to seek more Western targets”, The Washington Post, 1 February 2013, p. A8.

²⁴ Peter Tinti and Rick Gladstone, Relief and anxiety meld in Mali towns freed of Islamists”, The New York Times, 30 January 2013, p. A4.

France's decision also needs to be understood in the context of the country's post World War II history. In 1966, then President Charles de Gaulle wrote to President Lyndon B. Johnson to announce that his country was quitting the NATO alliance. "France is determined to regain on her whole territory the full exercise of sovereignty, at present diminished by the permanent presence of allied military elements or by the use of which is made of her airspace; to cease her participation in the integrated commands; and to no longer to place her forces at the disposal of NATO," wrote the French president to his American counterpart. Later Paris changed its stance and rejoined NATO but maintained its ability to send troops and equipment quickly to distant places. According to one assessment, France "should soon overtake austerity minded Britain as the world's fourth largest military spender, after the United States, China and Russia." However, the use of force outside its borders will be "on the basis of new conditions, which differ, French officials argue, from the old colonial habits and traditions known as Francafrique...France [now] means to act multilaterally, even when leading from the front, as it did in Libya, in the name of saving an ally and helping the Sahel region combat the spread of radical Islamists, some of them foreign jihadists, strongly connected to terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb...And the French take some pride in playing a leading role from a moral foundation. Even if French national interests are also at play, it is pushing other allies to act."²⁵ Unstated in this approach to the projection of military power was the desire to fill the gap that will be left in Europe once the United States' "pivot to Asia" is fully in place. As President Obama embarked on his second term, it was clear that he was prepared to work with other Western powers to beat back the spread of Islamic extremism. Not only that, he was prepared to let some Europeans take the lead in fighting the war. In both Libya and Mali the United States had played supporting roles to those of other European nations. He had left behind the swagger with which George W Bush, his predecessor, had walked the world stage.

Al-Qaeda 2.0

Intelligence agencies in the West have begun to talk about Al-Qaeda 2.0 which, according to the journalist David Ignatius, is "an evolving, morphing threat that lacks a coherent centre but is causing growing trouble in chaotic, poorly governed areas such as Libya, Yemen, Syria and Mali." Many officials liken this new problem to the spread of cancer cells. "These cells have only a loose, ideological connection with what remains the core leadership in Pakistan but they are stubborn and toxic". The reference to the core leadership situated in Pakistan is to Ayman al Zawahiri, who after the death of Osama bin Laden headed Al-Qaeda. He was hiding somewhere in the tribal belt of Pakistan most possibly in the rugged hills of North Waziristan. He was high on the list approved by President Obama of the people who could be targeted and killed by the use of American operated drones. "Striking at these local nodes – as the French are now doing in

²⁵ Steven Erlanger, "France's new way of military intervention", The International Herald Tribune, 21 January, 2013, p. 6.

Mali – can disrupt the new terrorist cells”, continues Ignatius. But analysts stress there will be consequences: The cells may metastasize further, drawing new jihadists into the fight and potentially threatening targets in Europe and the United States.²⁶

What has contributed to the spread of this disease is the change of some of the regimes in the Middle East following the Arab Spring. One element in the grand bargain that kept a number of autocrats in place was that they will not allow Islamic parties to develop strong roots in their soils. The strategy the United States followed after 9/11 was for the CIA to work closely with the security agencies in the countries where Islamists had a strong presence and could become a problem for the West. These agencies were strengthened and given both training and equipment to do surveillance and, if need be, disrupt the activities of the groups that were suspect. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence, ISI, and the various Arab intelligence services known as moukhabarats were closely aligned with the CIA. After the fall of the regimes headed by Gadhafi and Hosni Mubarak in the Arab world and of Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan, these links have been measurably weakened. Another looming threat was the possible change in the government headed by Bashar al-Assad in Syria. The most dangerous new Al-Qaeda threat may be the Al-Nusra Front in Syria.

But as noted in the previously quoted 2012 survey by the National Intelligence Council, Al-Qaeda 2.0 may run into strong resistance from the Muslim middle class as it learns more about the atrocities committed by the Islamists during their occupation of some of the towns in Mali’s north. Stories such as those published by The New York Times on 1 February, 2013²⁷ were picked up by the websites that reach the relatively secular and more enlightened segments of the Muslim society. When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, they were accepted by many people on the basis of what they promised to a war-torn country and a war-weary population. Now they have accumulated a record of governance which will appeal to only a small minority of the Muslim population but repel the majority.

Conclusion

Will Obama’s second term be better than his first? The second terms are not cursed as legend has it. Before going to his inauguration, the president invited a group of historians for dinner to talk about the performance of his predecessors who had been re-elected to serve again. According to Michael Beschloss, a presidential historian who attended the dinner, “Obama has read the

²⁶ David Ignatius, “A spreading al-Qaeda cancer”, The Washington Post, 31 January 2013, p. A17.

²⁷ Lydia Polgreen, “Timbuktu endured terror under harsh Shariah law”, The New York Times, 1 February, 2013, p. A1 and A9.

literature and understands overreach. This puts him one step ahead of most re-elected presidents”.²⁸

Even though and to the surprise of most economists, the American GDP shrank by 0.1 per cent in the past quarter of 2012, the economy was in a better shape than was the case when Obama began his first term. The decline was largely the result of “lower military spending, fewer exports, and smaller business stockpiles”. Although the October-December 2012 quarter was the worst since the economy crawled out of the Great Recession of 2007-09, the United States was expected to do much better than other older, industrial economies. However, it is in world affairs that President Obama is likely to face more challenges. The experience gained during his first term will likely help him steer his country and the rest of the world through the expected turbulence of the next few years.

As Financial Times editorialised on the eve of President Obama’s second inauguration, “with each year of Mr Obama’s first term, the costs of Washington’s first term became increasingly visible. Yet in contrast to the ‘gathering clouds and raging storms’ that Mr Obama described in 2009, the US is in relatively better shape than most of its counterparts. This may be little better than taking the prize for the least ugly in a beauty contest.”²⁹ Even though the Americans may be getting ready to surrender the first place to China in the global economic system, only they can provide the leadership the world needs as it restructures and transforms. The big test for the shaping of the new world order will be in the Muslim world, not only in the AfPak region but wherever there are weak governments unable to provide good governance thus leaving a great deal of space in which the forces of extremism could operate. Looking at some of the recent events around the world, it is not unreasonable to assume that the reordering in world affairs that is occurring may create a two-power arrangement in the area of global economics and a three-power link-up among the military powers. The first will involve the United States and China, and France added to the small group of international policemen in the second.

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²⁸ Quoted in Albert R. Hunt, “For Obama high hurdles in 2nd term”, The International Herald Tribune, 21 January, 2013, p. 2.

²⁹ Financial Times, “Barack Obama’s second term: US president must recapture promise of better politics”, 19 January, 2013, p. 6.

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